

A CTPA Visit to the DuSable Museum of African American History April 25, 2012

The Michigan Avenue Bridge is named the DuSable Bridge – have you noticed? Or is the name visible only to those on the boat tours? Perhaps you've seen the bronze bust of DuSable on Pioneer Plaza just northeast of the bridge.

Maybe you've heard that Jean Baptist Point DuSable is the Founder of Chicago, or its first permanent settler. Wrong! Permanent implies that he stayed, when in fact he retired to Missouri. But he did establish a trading post and flourish for several decades in what became Chicago.

DuSable, who was Haitian, part French and part African, married the daughter of a Potawatomie chief. He left in the early 1800s before Ft. Dearborn was built and before Chicago was founded in the mid-1830s. DuSable High School is named after him, and someday we will enjoy DuSable Park out on the lakefront facing Navy Pier. Being the first settler here, DuSable inspired development of the DuSable Museum of African American History.

Disclaimer from this writer: *Only 14 people attended this museum visit!* None of the trio of CTPA secretaries attended the museum visit, since two were working and the third was in Cuba (a likely excuse!). Therefore, this review is compiled from Donna Primas' notes and invitation to visit the museum, Marlin Keesler, from some poking around the internet, and one dramatic personal memory.

Among the CTPA who attended, **Marlin Keesler** was kind enough to let me know that this was his first visit ever to the Du, and he said it revealed more than he expected. Among the information he valued was the story of Margaret Burroughs and how she began the museum's great collection in her home. She taught history to children in the classroom and recognized a great void in the curriculum of African-American history. Marlin also appreciated more details about Harold Washington's story--how he faced issues other than the political agenda, and resistance everywhere he turned, often more racially motivated than political.

The DuSable Museum is the first and oldest museum dedicated to understanding and appreciation of the achievements, contributions and experiences of African Americans. Not surprisingly, it was founded in the early 1960s, the decade of the Civil Rights Movement. Thanks to the Chicago Park District, it is installed in the classical 1915 former Administration Building for Washington Park designed by Daniel Burnham. A 1993 addition was named in honor of Chicago's first African-American mayor, Harold Washington. Located at 57th Street and Cottage Grove along the east edge of Washington Park, the museum is not close to easy public transportation, but it has a small free parking lot and there is free parking on the roadways of Washington Park. One notes that "the Du" is free on Sundays.



Upon arrival several CTPA members passed and noticed a minibus by the entrance of the museum. Especially "wrapped" (decorated) with the DuSable name, most members took advantage of the open door to step inside. This vehicle has no seats, but rather is a mobile museum that visits schools and, we were told, this year will be parked at the Taste of Chicago. The well thought out interactive exhibits designed for grade school students are in four areas along a path that circles the vehicle's interior.

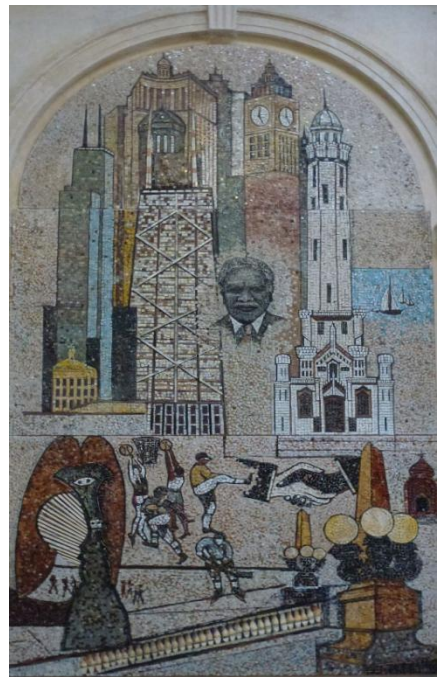
Several people from the museum welcomed the CTPA group, including **Bonnie DeShong**, **Director of External Affairs** at the DuSable Museum of African American History. It was after meeting this radio personality-turned-museum-employee that our CTPA visit was arranged. Bonnie told us, "Remember to take the time to DuSomething great today!" and "Just DU!"—slogans the museum is using to raise awareness.

Photography is not permitted in the museum, except in the entry hall where the **Founders Mosaics** by Chicago artist Thomas Miller are displayed. Shown are the eight museum founders as well as scenes of Chicago and DuSable. Unlike traditional mosaic that is made with porcelain or glass tile, these are made from



thousands of pieces of plastic that were harvested from plastic egg crate light diffusers which were then individually colored and arranged to create the images in the series.

The first stop on the CTPA guided tour led by excellent senior **docent DeMarcus Hyland**, was what he called the centerpiece of the collection. The impressive **“Freedom Now” mural**, by Robert W. Ames, is a carved bas relief on a huge piece of mahogany. After six years of work, the piece was completed in 1965. It contains 30 scenes and 400 faces, telling the story of slavery and African American history in the U.S. It includes some familiar names and images such as Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DeBois, etc. The massive slab appears to be three pieces of wood, but it was actually carved in one piece and later cut into three pieces for easier portability. Due to its position in the small auditorium (Ames Auditorium)—which is down the hall to the right of the entrance, past the restrooms and gift shop—it might be easy to overlook. Be certain any group to you take to DuSable sees it!



An **“Africa Speaks”** exhibit greets visitors and helps explain the vast variety of mankind from whom African Americans descend. Among the permanent collections are slavery-era relics including heavy iron shackles. Black Chicago artists are represented, including the famed Archibald Motley, Jr., whose works hang in the Art Institute. Even the desk itself belonging to Ida B. Wells is on display.

There is a small history of blacks in the Armed Services with photos and artifacts, from the Civil War to World War II, called **“Red White Blue & Black.”**

CTPA members were able to see a wonderful temporary exhibit called **“Journey of Hope in America: Quilts Inspired by President Barack Obama,”** on display through May 9. Not a collection of bed coverings as implied by the use of the word “quilt”, the exhibit is really a dazzling collection of dimensional fabric art, of many sizes and styles—applique, beading, stitching, piecing, etc.

Music forms an important part of African American history and is well represented (jazz, soul, rock & roll and gospel), especially with the temporary exhibit about the evolution of gospel with a focus on songwriter and musician Thomas Dorsey, long connected to Pilgrim Baptist Church. **Spread the Word! The Evolution of Gospel from Chicago to the World** will stay through June 24.

Probably the most fascinating exhibit is **A Slow Walk to Greatness: The Harold Washington Story**, all about our first African-American mayor who survived a contentious election while Jane Byrne and Richard Daley cancelled each other out. Harold was so popular that he was re-elected, but died in office. His body lay in state in the center of the City-County Building just after Thanksgiving in 1987, and thousands of Chicagoans passed by in his honor.

The DuSable’s dramatic “Harold” exhibit – one must say – is a little strange. Allow me to explain, for those of you who have not been to the Du. Harold Washington’s mayoral office is recreated in a big corner with a low wall forming the perimeter. A life-sized animatronic Harold sits at his Daley Center desk. Last winter, I took my granddaughter Meredith, age 9, to see the museum which neither of us had visited before, but I knew from publicity that we would see this particular Harold. I followed as Meredith ran along ahead of me, and I watched her standing at the low wall looking at Harold behind his desk. Suddenly, HE MOVED and BEGAN TO TALK! Meredith jumped in fright and amazement, and then laughed. We then both watched and listened. It took a while to absorb the unusual experience. This is one museum exhibit that *really* comes alive!

The **small gift shop** has a neat collection of African-American history books for children.

There was also a small exhibit which addressed **future plans for the museum**. We were told that the old stable directly south of the current park building will eventually become an expansion area for the DuSable Museum. Once sufficient funds are raised to renovate and modify the structure, the park access road between the two buildings will close and the museum will be Chicago’s first to have a “Campus” setting.

For more information on “the Du,” there’s a 26-minute film tour on line:

<http://learning.snagfilms.com/film/american-soul-the-dusable-museum-of-african-american-history>

Judith Randall, Co-Secretary CTPA